

Robert Curvin Interview: Steve Block Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Robert Curvin, Steve Block

Robert Curvin 00:02

Little bit more. Now, you're in the, in the center of the frame, right? So if you move to the left or to the right, you'll get out of it. So you have to stay stay,

Steve Block 00:16

Yeah, I mean, if I do this, I can do that.

Robert Curvin 00:18

Yeah. Well, if you do that, you have to then come back to where, where you are comfortable. The other thing is that the idea is to talk to the camera. Okay? And not to me.

Steve Block 00:30

Not to you okay.

Robert Curvin 00:32

Even I'm going to sit here to make it a little easier. But almost invariably, you end up having eye contact with the person that you're talking about. And I think I would take a little bit more distance. Yeah, I think that's. That's good. I tell you, your record is very interesting.

Steve Block 00:54

I thought you'd be interested in it-

Robert Curvin 00:56

Fascinating. I mean, I really found it. Actually, it's running already. I found it really quite fascinating. And maybe we can start by you're talking a little bit about your arrival in Newark, and how you got to Newark?

Steve Block 01:18

Well, getting to Newark is actually a longer story. I'll try to truncate it a bit, but because it starts with my growing up in an all white in an all white community with parents who were Republicans, for the most part, Eisenhower Republicans and they were assimilated Jews is what I what I might suggest and, and, and they voted for Eisenhower, a number of their friends I know voted for Stevenson in the 50s. But they were Eisenhower people. And and I went off to college pretty much without politics. And I went to Williams College, and I got involved in the Civil Rights stuff there pretty quickly and actually spent a Spring vacation on a exchange program at Morehouse College. About a dozen of us Williams guys went down to Morehouse. And later in the spring, a bunch of Morehouse guys came up to up to Williams. And there, we met a lot of the SNICC people. And we spent an afternoon with Martin King, which was pretty amazing and inspiring. And actually, that whole experience stimulated me to decide to work for something called the Northern Student Movement, the summer of 63, helping to organize for the big March that was looming on on Washington, in which he gave his famous now I Have a Dream speech. In a few days, it'll be 45 years to the day from when we're taping this. Barack will accept his nomination on the 45th anniversary of that incredible speech. In any case, I came back to college after that summer and was uneasy about my total preoccupation in civil rights in this sense that I began to realize that there were more things wrong with America than simply the way we treated people of color. And that led me to SDS. And so I became a member of SDS and I started a chapter at Williams and got involved with a lot of the people went to a lot of the national meetings during the rest of my junior year. And then my senior year, started a chapter I think I said that Williams in September of 64. And by the spring when we were organizing against the war, and we had the first big march on Washington on April 17 in 1965. I had pretty much decided that I was going to upon graduation, do some work with SDS and SDS had set up a bunch of community projects around the north to ultimately the goal was to link up with the southern movement to create a national poor people's movement. And I decided on going to Newark for some people and some other reasons that people reasons were Tom and Carol. Tom Hayden was, was in Newark and I had met him. I've gotten to know him, we'd become friends and he was my senior and for a number of years and really knew a lot and I wanted to learn from him. And Carol was best friends and Kyle Glassman was best friends in college with a woman I was dating my junior year at Williams and so Carol and I got to know each other. And so because they were in Newark, and because Newark was both far enough away from my home, I grew up in Westchester County, and yet close enough so that I could stay in touch without being around the corner. It felt all of that felt like the right place for me to go. So I went, I came to Newark in June of 65. And stayed working in Newark for 40 years.

Robert Curvin 05:11

Say a little bit about what Newark was like, when you got there and also what your understanding of what your role was there. And the SDS program,

Steve Block 05:25

Right. Well, I came to work with a, an organization called the Newark Community Union Project, which had been started jointly by SDS and an old line existing Newark organization called the Clinton Hill neighborhood council. Though I think before I got there, they had already split the NCUP had split away from the Clinton Hill neighborhood council. I think particularly my recollection was that the debate was over whether the SDS kids, as we were called, would come in and work for the neighborhood council

and do more work in the entire neighborhood. Whereas those who actually formed NCUP, were more concerned with the lower Clinton Hill area, which was poorer and blacker. Clinton Hill was still a little bit integrated and was less poor. I think that's fair and so and so that fight over almost geography really, where where was the organization going to focus its work led to a split and NCUP became its own organization. And I came in to be a, you know, a street organizer, and, and knocked on doors. And we were organizing around rats and roaches and other kinds of neighborhood issues and

Robert Curvin 06:44

the geography of your base or target area was the lower Clinton Hill area?

Steve Block 06:50

The lower Clinton Hill area, Peshine Avenue and Jelliff where we eventually lived and Bergen Street and Hunterdon, as I recall, you know pretty much between Avon Avenue and over across Clinton avenue to Hawthorne that was pretty much the I think that's right. And then maybe a few streets south of there as well. And, and I, you know, I mean, it was amazing. I mean, we lived in the community and we got to know people. And well, it's interesting, one of the things that I've always said, because there was a lot of talk, particularly as we got a couple of years later, and we got into the the sort of uprising of the summer of of 67. There's a lot of talk about so called Black racism and anti semitism and what I what I experienced as a white Jew, watching a lot of white Jewish girls, young women and white Jewish, well, white girls and white Jewish girls in coming through SDS and NUCP to spend time with us either over the summer or or (unintelligible), is that is that what was interesting to me is I learned right away that people have accepted you, depending on how you treated them. And the reason why there was a lot of angst in the black community towards some Jews is because some of them were landowners, were property owners, and they were fleecing tenants. Some of them were store owners and they were fleecing customers. Some of them were leaders of schools that were not doing right by I mean, the the principal of the neighborhood school that I went to teach at my second year was a Jew. And he wasn't very good. And he wasn't very, you know, sympathetic or open to people of color. And, and so there was a lot of anger. But it wasn't because they were Jewish, because the way they treated people, because I treated people differently as did all of us who came in to NCUP who were white, and who were Jewish, and we were all accepted in the community. And so I learned an interesting lesson about that early on. And it's been it was certainly my experience in those early years that poor people of color responded to you as you responded to them. It really was a different perception than what the larger community held.

Robert Curvin 09:17

What was the neighborhood like?

Steve Block 09:18

It was very poor. The housing stock was dilapidated. Rats and roaches were the order of the day, unfortunately. And we in those days, the Newark administration, the government was was the Addonizio administration and they were insensitive and not responsive. And so it was a really depressed community. And it sort of well, it was

Robert Curvin 09:53

In brief, how would you describe your objectives in terms of dealing with rats and roaches and poverty and the conditions on employment to conditions that you met in this (area)?

Steve Block 10:12

Well the goal was to try to figure out strategies and tactics that would actually make a difference, you know. And so we would do things like organized rent strikes when we could, I remember there was one experience where we organized a picket line in the suburbs around the landlord's home. And I think it was a little bit effective. As I recall, I think he made some improvements, cause part of what we were looking for was for people to fix up the apartments, because there was no attempt by the absentee landlords to keep. And there was no effort by the city administration to enforce whatever laws there were. And I don't remember, frankly, at this stage, what the laws were in terms of the requirements on landlords to keep buildings up to code, but they weren't, none of them were up to code. And so we were trying to get at least the apartments to become more habitable by forcing the landlords to fix them up. And we had some successes and probably more successes over time, but it was certainly worthy. And the idea also was to sort of organize people to start taking collective action on behalf of themselves, their families in their neighborhood. And so eventually, it led to when the poverty program came into town it led to our work on the neighborhood poverty program, area board three in Newark it was called and we organized and were able to have NCUP people become the leadership of that poverty program. And for some time, I forget a couple of years. We were the larger we the both the students in conjunction with the community folks that we were organizing and working with, were provided the leadership for that, for that poverty, that neighborhood branch of the poverty program. And we got some services. We got a community center built the Bessie Smith Community Center. Bessie Smith was the first president of that area board in the lower Clinton Hill section, and she passed away and tragically as I remember, and so when money was received from the federal government, to build a community center it was named the Bessie Smith Community Center. And I think it was on Hawthorne Ave.

Robert Curvin 12:27

Can you identify or name a couple of other accomplishments or successes that NCUP had during that period?

Steve Block 12:39

Well, we were very much involved in we got pretty much involved in the George Richardson campaign for state senate was it I think, assembly, right. And that was our first foray into electoral politics. It was interesting because we debated it, because you know, a lot of us came from a progressive ideology, shall we say, that suggested electoral politics were part of the problem and not a part of the solution. But the debate was won by the community, because all the community activists that we had organized and were now part of our NCUP infrastructure, were all very interested in working for George. And then later for Ken Gibson, whose mayoral campaign actually begins in February of 66. Late with no money, but a number of us get excited about it, and as you recall, can wind up getting 17,000 votes, which blew everybody's mind because nobody thought he'd get any votes. And he had no money and no name recognition, but there was clearly a thirst that would explode, of course, both through and then after the uprising in the 1970 election. So part of it was a lot of what we're trying to do was to get people active and empower people. I don't know that we,

we had that many successes, my one personal success, which I can talk about. And it's interesting the timing of it, because the night that John Smith was beaten up in July of 1967. I had organized a large meeting at the church across the street from Peshine Avenue School, where I had been that previous year as a 7th grade teacher. And the subject was the decision by the Board of Education to instead of expand the school or build a new school to put in split sessions as their so called answer to overcrowding. And everyone had known that split sessions were awful. That anything that kids liked about school was done away with everything they hated about school was emphasized. And it was I mean, there was no nothing good about in terms of educational quality. And so I spent that summer organizing we used door to door we used actually a bullhorn and a loudspeaker system running through the neighborhood, talking about and out of that meeting, the night of whatever I forget the date. The night John Smith was beaten up. We had 300 people at the church. There was a commitment made among all of us to hold the school boycott. When, when school began, so we organized over the summer for that school boycott, and when school opened, 85% of the community held the kids home. 85%. And it led to negotiations with the Board of Education. With two results, one was they took over an unused space on Bergen and Clinton Avenue, and created an annex temporarily. And secondly, they built they started building a year later Clinton Avenue School to relieve the overcrowding. So that was a monumental success. And it was a combination of our my and our grassroots organizing and leadership. Getting the ministers involved who were this was an easy and nobody disagreed with us. Everybody was even though we were taking on the Addonizio administration and their ____? school board. Everybody was was sort of on board in the neighborhood around that. So it was a it was a very good development.

Robert Curvin 16:20

You talk about supporting George Richardson. What about other groups in the city were there times when NCUP worked collaboratively? Or in support of other

Steve Block 16:32

Certainly, we worked with CORE we met you and we met Ray Proctor and Ray Proctor and I would later become co leaders of a movement at Essex County College which should I do that now? But certainly CORE was was a big one. I don't know that there was a--the NAACP was pretty tied in with the Addonizio administration, as I recall, our our friends, the Payne brothers were leaders of the local NAACP, as I recall, and they were very much part of the it's interesting where they've come today but but but in those days they were tied in and but CORE, Earl Harris was also he was an elected was he a senator? Freeholder, right. He was a Republican, but was sympathetic to the civil rights movement. And so we worked with Earl as I recall, we work with CORE just want to finish this thought. Of course, the poverty program created its own organizations that we worked with. I may have forgotten others, you may want to if you've got some. But my association with Ray flowered when I landed, I taught for a year at Peshine Avenue School, and my contract was not renewed because in those days, they were not looking for change agents in the schools. They were looking for people to do as they were told. And so Eric Mann and I, both of whom were teaching, Eric was teaching eighth grade and I was teaching seventh grade. He was actually fired during the middle of the year. There was a big commotion about that and a hearing didn't lead anywhere other than to organize some people I was allowed to stay till the end of the year. And then my contract wasn't renewed. I spent a year working for county welfare, working with the Welfare Rights Organization and urging my clients to get involved with with organizing

and with demanding better treatment and more more and more funding and all. And then in the summer of 68 maybe. I think that's when it was. I got a job working for the Urban Institute at Essex County College as a program developer, and a part time teacher. And I realized very quickly that the college had just opened its doors a couple of years earlier. It was mismanaged. It was in a old building in Clinton Street in the center of Newark, that was kind of disheveled. And because it was it was so mismanaged. There was a lot of thinking on the part of the freeholders, it was a county institution that maybe it was a mistake to bring it into Newark. That the real problem was its location, not the management. I was furious. As soon as I picked it took me a while to figure all that out. But once I figured it out, I said, we got to this can't We can't let this leave Newark. And so I organized something called the People's Council. With all of my community ties. I brought community people in, we organized students, and in those days, a lot of the faculty were 60s activist types, including Ray Proctor. So Ray and I got working together on this and we built the People's Council. And we I don't know how far this will go. But let me let me at least share this together on this and we built the People's Council and we I don't know how far this will go. But let me let me at least share this interesting little tidbit. So so so that we had all these progressive types involved in the People's Council and from all the various tendencies from the 60s. So we had somebody who was sympathetic to the Communist Party position about things which, which and he wanted us to organize around one issue. And I forget what his one issue was, but it was just one issue. Then there was a woman who was involved in the Ivanca? Ramos? brigade, and she wanted us to organize around sexism, racism, and imperialism, you know, the abstract isms. And I had said, neither of those made any sense to me that what we should do is develop the most profound analysis of what's wrong with Essex County College, put that out there, and analyze and organize around that. And fortunately for me, as the leader of this organization, most people agreed with me and so we put out a 10 point program that laid out everything that was wrong with the college, including the rumors about it moving out of Newark, you know, that being wrong, including the total mismanagement of Ellis White was his name was the first president of Essex. And I forget a bunch of other sort of more administrative issues, things that really touched, particularly kids and some that touched faculty. And we organized a student strike. And we succeeded in getting kids to hold out meanwhile, the faculty was angry at us. And we finally a couple of students and I went to the Faculty Senate. And we and we met with the faculty senate and persuaded them to join the strike. So then the Faculty Senate had and the students government and everything. And that's when the Board of Trustees under the direction of the freeholders started meeting with us. And the interesting thing Maurice Davis, remember the name Morty Stavis(?). Maurice Davis is a very progressive lawyer who worked for the Law Center for Constitutional Rights, I believe in the city. And, and he was retained by the Faculty Senate. Think this is right. And the problem with was that Morty was a labor lawyer, he wasn't a community lawyer. So Morty wanted to settle the strike on faculty terms, not on student terms. So the fact that so we had to create this compromise position, narrow the issues. And essentially what we got out of the strike was they fired Ellis White. And they made a commitment to stay in Newark. And that was a big one. And I am and I'm very proud, because without that struggle, we could well have lost because they were talking about taking it because there is a campus an Essex County campus I think Cedar Grove or somewhere else in the county. And they were talking about about doing it then, and eliminating the newer campus. And of course, we got the eventually we got the Newark, Essex County College, a new college built with a real campus and eventually hired Zach Yamba as president he from (unintelligible) has done a pretty good job of leading the college for many years now. Interesting, Zach. And when we had the struggle and the strike, Zach was a newly recruited African. From Africa, I

forget which country professor on the faculty, but was absolutely mute was not involved in any of this at all. And so originally, he would later become and rise up and become quite an effective leader of Essex County college, despite the fact that (unintelligible)

Robert Curvin 23:45

We're already up to 1968. Right. 69. Right. Let's go back prior to 67 and talk about the rebellion, or uprising, whatever you choose to talk about? What was what what were your impressions? What was your experience during that period?

Steve Block 24:11

Right. Not I wasn't organizing into the central ward. Some others were. So I had very little direct contact with 16th street and over there where, where it all happen, at least in where it started. We were living on Jelliff Avenue. And I can only give you flashes of memory because I you know, I mean, I you know, I remember I was actually living in an attic bedroom. And I remember lying on the on the floor, because bullets were flying over the apartment. I mean, the the National Guard was actually shooting all over the place. And it was it was amazing to me. I mean, you know, we were all sort of in rage that the National Guard was in the neighborhood and, and to this day, I have not thought through what my current view is of all that, frankly, I, but but it was awful. I mean, it felt like we were an occupied community. We know of course, what happened the tragedy of 26 was it people who were killed? And without I would argue sufficient provocation, I think there's pretty conclusive evidence that maybe maybe there were some shooters people shooting, but not many. A lot of these people were in the apartments as I recall. But I don't again, I don't I don't claim to have airtight memory on that side of it.

Robert Curvin 25:47

Now, surely after the rebellion, though. NCUP it kind of dissolves. Is that correct?

Steve Block 25:55

Well, right. Well, what happens is that the uprising creates all sorts of changed attitudes and thinking among people of color among us, you know, because we still were heavily the outsiders were heavily white, in what was now a largely, overwhelmingly, almost exclusively black, poor, black, and increasingly militant community, right. And so while nobody, to my knowledge (unintelligable) me, nobody said, You guys ought to move to some other community. And in fact, when we finally decided to, sort of dissolve NCUP and those of us who stayed in Newark moved to Ironbound a lot of our key people that we had worked with from the community were unhappy that we were leaving. I'm always proud of Terry Jefferson telling me as we were leaving, Steve, you've got a white face, but a black heart. I, I hold that comment in my memory as a as a badge of honor. Because it was true. I mean, we were we while we were white, we were of the community, we had become another community, we were very much part of it and had dear friends and to this day, and but it did make sense from sort of stepping back and looking at the bigger picture, it made sense for us to try those of us who wanted to stay in Newark to move to a community where we could try to build bridges back. So and really, the three communities that we considered were Vailsburg, which was still pretty much white, the North Ward, which was white, with very Italian, and with a lot of racism and anti black sentiment, fomented a lot by Anthony Imperiale and his organization, Adubato in those days wasn't yet as much of a presence as he became, once the Gibson campaign emerged and Adubato became a supporter. And then there

was Ironbound which is a more mixed community and seemed like a place more receptive to people like us. And so we moved to Ironbound. With sort of two strands, one of one group of us we're working with adults, and later created the Ironbound Community Corporation which started with a daycare center, and the rest of us working with teenagers, which led to the creation of Independence High School, which I founded in 1971. With a bunch of kids and then brought in some of the other adults and then recruited both people from Essex County College, I was still working as a program developer and this was seen as a program of Essex County College for because they had gotten a grant to train potential community college teachers. And they needed a community experience and their community experience for a number of them was working at this Community High School that we had set up this alternative high school for dropouts, called Independence High School on Van Buren Street in Ironbound. But in Ironbound, you were not working under the rubric of NCUP any longer No, no, no, we created the Ironbound Youth Project and the Ironbound Community Corporation. Those are two corporations, nonprofits that we set up. And the one was working with adults and daycare and youth. We had we actually had two youth centers first.

Robert Curvin 29:27

Did you continue the connection to SES (?)?

Steve Block 29:29

Yes. And but not but it wasn't anything like what it was purported to be. With NCUP. It was much more sort of incidental, as opposed to being pivotal.

Robert Curvin 29:42

How many of the NCUP people stayed and went to Ironbound and how many left? I mean, I I remember some of them.

Steve Block 29:51

Carol, myself, Norm Fruchter who never really lived in the community but was you recall was making a movie the Troublemakers with with NCUP. And then he became a major part of the High School. Interesting, his new book, Urban schools Public Will contains a section in which he talks about the high school experience because it was, it was very useful to a lot of us in helping form our ideas about what's wrong with public education and what you can do with kids who were thought of as uneducable. Because we did a much better job than the public schools were doing. But anyway, so it was Norm and Derek Winans came with us, who was not an original SDS person was a Harvard graduate, grew up in, in Newark. His family owned Winans Paper Company, I think. And he was a rebel and, and so he kind of hooked on with us. And when we moved to Ironbound he came, in fact, Derek and I were roommates for a while. And in Newark, I mean, in on Peshine Avenue, not when we actually had some political disagreements once we moved to Ironbound that, that led to some of the differences that we saw. But in any case, I think it was the four of us, I don't know that there was anyone else that was sort of pivotal from the NCUP experience. I'd have to check with Carol's always got a better memory than I do about this.

Robert Curvin 31:25

How would How would you sum up your experience with NCUP in Newark?

Steve Block 31:34

Well, it was,

Robert Curvin 31:35

Let me let me first go back and ask in your mind, NCUP was, in fact, part of a larger mosaic of protest and activity in the city, right?

Steve Block 31:47

Oh, absolutely. I mean, there were there. Were there, there are things going on all over the place, some of which were just homegrown, little, you know, struggles, some of which were CORE initiated things. The poverty program initiated some stuff. Oh, yeah, there was a whole the Freedom party before that. And then And then, as we get to, I was not at all involved, as you were and Junius particularly in the black and was in the black and brown, Black and Puerto Rican convention. 68, I think

Robert Curvin 32:21

That was 69

Steve Block 32:21

Was it 69, all right which really was the seems to me was the, the place where the Gibson campaign was first fully developed and consolidated. Right. And all because he had done surprisingly well, and and I guess other people have said this, and you certainly know this Bob, what I learned, I was not part of those. I wasn't yet mature enough in my, in my political development to be part of those discussions in 66. But but everybody, including yourself, who was asked to run for mayor chose not to. And Gibson was the only one who had the foresight to say, Yes, I mean, with all due respect to him, and so he was the odds-on guy, and I guess the 69 Convention was where he got sort of nominated in a certain way. Right. And, and that was certainly something different than but a number of NCUP people I, as I recall, went to it and participated in it. I'm sure Jesse was there and I guess Terry was there and

Robert Curvin 33:28

Jesse explain who Jesse was

Steve Block 33:30

Jesse Allen was. Was he a truck driver, when we first met him, I forget what his profession was, but he was a very much a community person who was out of work when we met him, and he became a key NCUP organizer and would later get elected as the central Ward council person. Right away with Gibson or later, I don't know, was it right away? Was it 1970? Did Jesse get elected in 70? I don't know that he did. I don't know that it was 70. It might have been a ac second generation or something. He would get elected Central Ward councilman. So I think Jessie went and Terry, who is our office manager. I know went. I don't recall, if Betty Moss, who was one of our close neighborhood people went Furman Smith, I'm sure went that was Bessie's ex husband, ex but he was he was a widower, right because Bessie Bessie died and, and with Thurman was terrific as well. He went George Fontaine, somebody who was active with us went. I mean, I haven't thought about these folks in a while and so, but I'm sure there were a whole smattering of, of people who Anita Terry, who we had worked

with and organized and were part of our kind of infrastructure. Who went went and I'm sure were participants in an act. I wasn't there. So I don't have that experience to recall. But and I don't even know where they were there any White people have had or was it all black and brown folks?

Robert Curvin 35:13

It was really black and Puerto Rican. And a few whites from the north Ward showed up challenge our effort to make this a black and Puerto Rican, exclusive community effort But it was without friction. And they came in and sat down and listened to everything left. Yeah.

Steve Block 35:38

Was this Adubato's people? Or was it-

Robert Curvin 35:40

No they were more Imperiale's people. Yeah. I guess what I'm trying to get on the record is some sense of how you feel the NCUP contribution can be measured to the community, in an organizational sense, but also what it meant to you personally.

Steve Block 36:04

Well, it changed my life. I mean, I mean, I will. I mean, it depends on like, if you think if we think that creating, or creating the struggle that led to the construction of Clinton Avenue School, was a major accomplishment, then I will happily take credit for that. And as well as the work I did at Essex County, which came really a little bit later. But there's no doubt that the experience of Newark is what led me to the life I've led. I mean, I have been an organizer and a change agent, my whole life wherever I'd been in communities, in institutions for urban political and increasingly urban education, reform and improvement. And that all came out of my NCUP experience. I mean, knowing how to do that, seeing the world from the bottom up. I mean, here I am, you know, I mean, I'm an assimilated Jew, sort of a non observant Jew growing up in Westchester County, New York, going to Williams College, right? Pretty elite, small, largely white, although now they got 30% of the kids of color. But in those days, there was maybe two or three students of color at Williams College, coming to Newark and becoming who I become and it's all because of that experience there's no question about that

Robert Curvin 37:26

How'd you support yourself?

Steve Block 37:28

Well, the first year money was raised from wealthy suburbanites and there may have been some foundation money in there somewhere and progressive foundations I don't, I was Tom was doing Tom Hayden was doing most of the fundraising as I recall. But we lived sparsely and you know, we lived we all lived together in apartments and we whatever family money we can raise, we did that as well. And and we lived a lot, on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Uh, Terry would cook for a lot of us in the office and, and then what was clear, for me after the, as the first year of being an organizer, were on that if I was going to stay in the neighborhood, I wanted to get a job. And that's when I got the job as Eric Mann and I did at Peshine Avenue school. And so then I had, we had a little bit of resources and I actually got my first new car, I got a 1966 Ford station wagon because I wanted to be able to take kids

around because I was going to be a teacher. And geez I remember it cost I think \$2,300 a brand new station wagon 1966. And but but I will say absolutely that, that the NCUP experience dramatically changed my life and and made me the person that I am today. And it really has been me to the degree that I still think of myself as something of a radical meaning going to the heart of things, you know, go into the root causes of things. That experience enabled me, as I said before, to sort of see the world. From the vantage point as best I could of those who are most negatively affected by whatever reality so that when I look at as I become something of an expert on urban school reform, I look at it from the vantage point, first of kids, and then of their parents and teachers, you know, because they're all in varying degrees, victims when schools are not run properly. Kids, first and foremost, their parents and then teachers as well, too often. And so a lot of my work is aimed at kind of bridge bridging the gaps between teachers, kids and their parents (doing?) that kind of bridge bridging the gaps between teachers, kids and their parents.

Robert Curvin 39:54

Give me two or three things that you think were different in the neighborhood as a result of NCUP being there,

Steve Block 40:03

Well, the new school that I did. A lot more people empowered. And Louise Patterson, I haven't thought of her. She was somebody who was very strong, very smart. The Bessie Smith Community Center that didn't exist before. Some apartments fixed up, we we, we took on Jack's meat market, I recall on on Clinton Avenue, somewhere in that period, that three year period 65 to 68. He had been giving credit, which he wasn't supposed to do to welfare recipients, and then jacking up the bill that he sent to them. And, and people were just having to pay through the nose much more than they should have. And so we did a picket line around Jack's Meat Market and I think we may have closed it down. Damn, did you remember did we do that? Was CORE part of that?

Robert Curvin 41:10

I was on the line

Steve Block 41:10

Was it was it was a joint NCUP core experience. Right. So, you know, so there were bits and pieces. There is no question. Well, and the other thing I would say is that is that we certainly were part of the process that led to an awakening that led to the uprising, and then in turn the Gibson election, right. I mean, I mean, we were, one can't say that we in any way were causative. I mean, we were just part of a neighborhood experience, but certainly people who directly we touched and work with us, and were getting involved their consciousness of being raised about possibilities. And so I think that, certainly for the people who we touched, and maybe for a little bit beyond that, we I think we were part of the process that led to the takeover by the African American community in 1970.

Robert Curvin 42:05

You're part of a larger movement of protest and engagement.

Steve Block 42:11

No question. Yeah, yeah. Right. And to create consciousness and wider change in the community. What I do think, I think I now, see, I didn't know enough about what you guys were doing. I mean, I do think that our contribution in that we lived in the neighborhood, and we were dealing with sort of some of the poorest folks in the neighborhood and finding terrific people with rough edges that we helped develop, in terms of them learning how to negotiate and deal with, I think we had we were a little bit unique in that sense. But we were still very much a part of a much larger mosaic. No question. And, and as part of both nationally, in other words, people were being affected by what they saw on television, by what was happening around the country, and then by the organizational experiences that were being conducted throughout the city. So yeah, I think I mean, I think I don't want to, I don't want to overly minimize or exaggerate. Right. And I will say, personally, that I like I said, I, you know, I mean, I feel very good about what I accomplished in the work that I did, but but in plain truth, I'm probably a much greater beneficiary of that experience than anybody else. Because I, as I said, I, my, my life was totally turned upside down. And

Robert Curvin 43:33

What would you draw out of this experience for lessons for young people today? And if you were sitting in front of a class in Millburn, or maybe in Newark group of high school students, what would you say, might be the most important lesson that you would want to convey?

Steve Block 44:02

Organizing always works, if you're an effective organizer, whether it's in labor, or institutionally based or community based. It's getting people together to fight for common interests. Works, if you do it effectively. At any level, it's I mean, American history is replete with examples at all levels, the national level at the state level, the local level. And that, that it's a lost art in too many places. You know, one of the interesting things that I talked about not so much recently, but I remember when I was in college, and we had to, I had to organize students to come to an anti apartheid demonstration that I was trying to hold in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, at The GE plant just after the April 1765 (1965), March on Washington, in order to get the 100 Williams and (____) students who eventually came, I had to talk to every one of them, and convince every one of them. Three years later, if you wanted to get 1000 students to come to a demonstration against the war in Vietnam, all you had to do was put up a sign. And one of the things that that different tactical moment meant that is, all you needed to do was a sign. Three years later, was early you actually convince everybody to come out, meant that ideology became much more predominant later on, because there wasn't any requirement that you persuade anybody, all you do is put up a sign so many people had had sort of emerged as anti war people. And I think that, that one of the things, if you really are organizing, one of the things that you're required to do is to be very pragmatic. You've got to have good people skills, you got to be persuasive, you got to help people see their interests in ways that they may not have thought about it before. And so I don't know why I'm saying that it's just that's on my mind. But it's sort of an to me is always an interesting insight that when you when you are compelled to actually talk to people to get them involved, it forces you to be more human. When you're when you when all you got to do is write a sign and put it up somewhere you can get involved in all this ideological gobbledegook. And I think that student movement got infected with in the late 60s and led to its demise in my mind, actually. Can we switch now to education policy, because that's a important dimension of your experience that we haven't, it doesn't exactly fit into the NCUP story? Well, it does in the sense that the two of us went off to teach at Essex Coun-

at the

Peshine Avenue School, Eric Mann and myself, and we were two NCUP organizers. And we both did. He didn't do so much community organizing. And I mostly because he went off and did some other things after he got fired, but my ability to organize that struggle around the split sessions issue really comes straight out of my NCUP experience the year before and but I also it's fair to say that my understanding of what's wrong with public education, in poor communities of color emerges that year, I was a teacher. And I, you know, and I lived in the community and I, I visited kids and their families in their homes, and I did stuff with kids in the afternoon and on weekends. Which is rare, even then, it's impossible now to see people doing that, but it's rare even then. But I never became a good teacher, I needed a lot more practice and instruction and what have you then I had that first year because there was no in service training, there was none of the stuff. But in the good urban schools, there are now for young teachers to learn how to become good teachers, none of that was available then. But I saw the oppression, I saw the sort of the lack of any sort of notion of treating kids where they are and trying to bring them along. They had to measure up or else you know, and it was interesting, because a lot of the older African American teachers in the school thought that Eric and I were racists because we were not heavy handed with kids. And to them. That meant that we had we didn't have high expectations for them. To them-

Robert Curvin 48:47

This, this brings me to a very interesting question, which I'm not professing any side that I, you know, would be on. But it's a question that swirls around the African American community. How do you, I guess, measure or translate the portion of responsibility for the education of a child to the parents or to the home, as opposed to the institution? In other words, can the schools do it all?

Steve Block 49:26

Yeah. I think this schools can do most of it. And my evidence is that if you go to some of the best Headstart programs around the country, or some of the best preschool programs serving poor kids, that whether or not the parents have turned the corner and start doing what the middle class literature says parents ought to do for their children at home, whether or not that's going on. Kids are learning and kids are growing. In schools where teachers have learned how to teach where the class sizes are appropriately small. Where there is a good relationship between school and family and school and community. Wherever the curriculum is interesting, and teachers have learned their craft, there is no question that if you are, and I'll give you an anecdote, personal anecdote in a minute, but it's no question but that, but that's in my, in my experience, there are examples of schools throughout the country, where because the faculty has come together, the community, the teachers are working together, good leadership. The kids achievement levels far exceed the norm, and go far beyond what their family background would predict normally. And the missing ingredient is not, as I say, that the parents have adopted middle class norms and home. Obviously, if they do, that's better, I'm not suggesting it's not a good thing. I am suggesting, however, that it is absolutely my experience, I really have very strong feelings about this, that, that when teachers and others, and even the people who say we've got to change, Richie Rothstein writes about this other people write about this Jean (??) wrote a book against schools about Newark. And she and I debated this all the time. A lot of progressive thinkers, make the claim that we'll never turn the corner on schools, until we eliminate poverty and empower, you know, poor communities much more, so, et cetera, et cetera. And-

Robert Curvin 51:40

Go back to that sentence again, and say it over again, because I moved the camera when you moved you got out the _____

Steve Block 51:50

I was mentioning Richard Rothstein, who writes about these matters. And Jean anion wrote the book, _____ schooling. And she credits me with a little bit in her book, because we had a number of conversations about that. And I know they take the view that, that the, the impoverishment of the community is a fundamental detriment to school improvement and to kids achievement. And it's true, but it's not absolute, in my mind. And I think it lea- it allows too many educators off the hook, because people have said forever, these kids are not uneducatable. I can't do it. You know, they're too poor, their families are not participating and not coming out. They're not doing what they're not reading to the kids at home. Sorry, I keep looking at you because, because but I'll _____. And that's an excuse. I mean, if the truth is that, particularly if you start kids young, and it's why we'll get to Abbot in a little bit. But But But why the Abbott rulings in New Jersey was, was so important that we that we got the court to mandate high quality preschool, because if you start kids at three, especially with with high quality educational programs, with teachers that know what they're doing small classes, and all good parents school relationships, regardless of what's happening at home, I would argue, kids could learn a lot more. And a lot of kids can learn a whole lot more. If they get really good solid experiences starting at age three, and they hit the ground running when they when they go to kindergarten.

Robert Curvin 53:32

Well tell me about Abbott and explain whatever it is. And I guess, give me your interpretation of

Steve Block 53:39

The struggle, my personal struggle?

Robert Curvin 53:41

The struggle, no, I'm really more interested in Abbott as a policy milestone. And the extent to which it's prescriptions are critical or important, right to the future of public schooling, in urban communities in New Jersey,

Steve Block 54:05

Well in the country. And it still is, even though it's being disassembled, as we speak here in the summer of 2008. Quickly, in the 80s, sorry, in the 70s. After I did, I left independence High School in 1974. With some friction with my colleagues, because I was unhappy over how much we were unable to relate to the public system. One of the reasons I wanted to start Independence high school was not only to provide a good high school experience for the kids we had met in the Ironbound community and others, but also to make a statement that these kids were and kids like them were eductable, that if you did it differently. They could actually learn stuff. And in fact, half of the kids that we work with went on to college, not that many of them graduated because they were too damaged by the time they were 16, 17 and 18. But they got enough skills and got enough motivation. And some of them did graduate me, we no doubt made a dramatic difference in the lives of a lot of those kids. But but we were not able to involve ourselves with the public school struggles in the early 70s. Gibson was elected mayor, it was a

new time, a lot of hope. You know, and I hope that we could, as at ex-NCUP people with all of our contacts around the city, that we could have been able to make a statement that we could have gotten people to pay attention to, that would have helped us play a role in improving the high school experience in the Newark Public Schools. We had no energy to do that. It took all of our energy to make the school work first for the 25 kids that we enrolled, and then it gradually grew to about 100 kids in high school. And so I was unhappy over the inability to turn that corner and to actually play a role. So I left in 74, did some other things ran Unified Vailsburg Services organization for a couple of years. And then did some education work, organizing parents and then doing statewide policy analysis with a an organization called school watch. And in 1980, I got hired after school Watchh lost its funding by an amazing woman named Marilyn Moore Hauser, who had become the executive director of a still fairly new at that time organization called Education Law Center. She had she was a civil rights nun in the 60s work with Father Groppi in Milwaukee. went to law school late in life was a student of Paul Trachtenberg, who had the foresight Paul did to found and create the Education Law Center. When he was involved in another school finance case called Robinson V. K hill in the 70s. He knew that this was going to be a long struggle, and that if it was going to be successful and required building legal and other capacity to fight that over time against the state, so he created the Education Law Center. And in 1980, Maryland hired me to help her develop the data and other and do other work in the in the organization to file a case against the state the second such case, because the remedy, in the earlier case, Robinson V. K Hill didn't work. The remedy just didn't provide enough money didn't provide enough mandates. And by the time, Matt and I got together in 1980, as I began to analyze the data, the gap in funding between rich and poor if I hadn't had reemerged and was growing again. There was a year or two when there was some money because of the Robinson Cahill case that went to the urban districts that narrowed the gap, but then it started to widen again. And so I went to work for the Education Law Center and in 1981, Maryland filed Abbott I was pleased to play a role in finding the plaintiffs there were 23 I think, original kids who were plaintiffs and added from four communities Camden, Jersey City I can't remember the altitude No, it wasn't Newark. That it was Paris Camden Jersey City Passaic wasn't this wasn't the SEC. No.

Robert Curvin 58:27

Patterson Patterson wasn't. Anyway, okay, we can train that.

Steve Block 58:33

That's right. I should remember it's not I can't call it right away. And, and so I we did that together. And, and but what was interesting is I was on the Hoboken school board at I moved to Hoboken in the mid 70s. And got involved in local political stuff in Hoboken and was on the on the Hoboken school board and was finding in Hoboken which was would later become an avid district, that it wasn't only insufficient funds that were the problem. It was also what came to be known as political interference. It was politicians using the federal and state and local money that come into schools for patronage purposes. And, and Hoboken part of Hudson County was an absolute quintessential example of that with all kinds of politicians on the pay literally politicians, elected officials on the payroll, doing jobs that either weren't needed, or there were no show and only hiring people who would work for them during only hiring people who would work for them during election time. And that I saw that the quality of education that kids received as a school board member I saw what my colleagues I was surrounded by, by people connected to the machine in Hoboken. Oh, that they were their decisions that they were

making were largely reflective of their political exigencies, and not based on any notion of what's wrong with the schools and that we make them better. And I mean, that that led me to a whole nother trajectory and Hoboken, which we could talk about if you'd like, but, but in any case, it did, it did help me see that. The issue wasn't only about about money, it was also about the quality of leadership locally, and what motivated who got hired for what reason, which would become a very important factor in my eventually leaving the Law Center some 24 years later, which we can talk about in a couple of minutes if you'd like. But in any case, so And Madeline, I actually started have some battles about that internally, because I was very public about and in fact, gave a speech at the school board's annual the jersey School Board's annual convention in 1982, in which I used Hoboken as a case study, and and really described in detail how political interference leads to the hiring of people who have no business running schools, and which in turn leads to low morale amongst staff and bad education for kids and lack of community participation, and that there's a pretty direct connection there. And as a result, political interference became, and I got the School Board Association start paying attention to it became a major issue statewide. But unfortunately, the Kane administration decided rather than to follow this suggestion that some of us who were together, including the Jersey City superintendent, and her green was the former head of school watch, and he's doing some other that

Robert Curvin 1:01:50

okay, we're on now.

Steve Block 1:01:51

Yeah, that I given the speech before the annual school Board Association urban luncheon, and named political interference as a real problem in urban districts. And it was picked up I mean, people started to talk about it. We had some other people involved besides myself, including the superintendent in Jersey City, Mike Ross, who had been appointed and gotten tenure, during a brutal brief flirtation with reform in Jersey City when Paul Jordan was mayor in the early 70s. And Mike was very upset about political interference in Jersey City as a parent was in Plainfield, and I was in Hoboken. And so we had proposed something that the governor chose, and the commissioner chose not to consider and instead they they adopted, take state takeover as their answer to political interference. And that's a whole nother tape if we wanted to talk about that. But in any case, Marilyn Morehouse, her and I back at the Education Law Center, we're actually having some battles about this because she was annoyed that I was publicly talking about something other than school finance inequities, and thought that it would give the state ammunition in court, against her our case. And so and I thought that you had to do both, he had to get more money and eliminate political interference, because if he if he got more money, what eventually happened to too many districts would happen, which is that they would just do more of the same and it wouldn't change what kids received. So I eventually left for the first time I had three tours of duty at the Law Center. First time I left in the winter of 83, to run for city council in Hoboken, which I did, and I gotta meet, I want to talk too much about Hoboken. But I ran last but became a player. And so there's a whole bunch of Hoboken related stuff that we could talk about if we wanted to. But I eventually went back to the Law Center in Ada at Maryland's request to help her put together her appeal of the initial commissioners decision in the AVID case, which was a losing decision for the Law Center. And he essentially the Commission have found that school finance inequities were not a problem, constitutionally. And I helped her put that appeal together. And that appeal went to the Supreme Court. And in 1990, the Supreme Court issued the abotu ruling, which is the historic ruling on behalf of the

kids, and essentially said that you had to have parity in funding between rich and poor districts, average spending in the rich districts and each of the poor districts. And secondly, you had to have enough extra money to provide for the special needs that poor kids bring to school that rich kids don't have, because they grow up in relative affluence. And that was historic and then Abbott has gone on to have about 15 or 16 inversions of it are different court decisions, most of which were for the kids. And there's one right now, because we're the Corizon administration is trying to undo much of what of what the Abbott courts have required. In the end, by the 1998, avid five decision, the court required not only parity, but high quality preschool reform at the elementary and secondary levels, lots of other supplemental programs as needed school based health clinics, after school programs, summer programs, better training for teachers, more parental engagement, all of which had dollar signs potentially attached to it, as well as substantive mandates. And the ultimate battle was really between the state and the Education Law Center, because the state never wanted to do this. And they stalled and delayed and and unfortunately, too many districts because of the political interference identified earlier, that was still around in too many districts. Not enough of the Abbott districts were able to take full advantage of the new resources, and do the kind of reforms that were essential.

Robert Curvin 1:06:19

Give me your assessment of that decision about preschool because, I mean, it's my impression that that decision, really, in a way move that that leaps ahead.

Steve Block 1:06:35

Well, it wasn't just the preschool, it was the whole thing. Because for one thing, where even where there were successes around the country, as you know, this is a state issue, because it's the state constitutional language that you challenge school finance staff. In New Jersey, the words are thorough and efficient. And and, and even where there have been victories in other states, there has never been a startling requirement that you tailor funding for urban districts at the level that the wealthiest districts on average get. Typically its total district averages, including poor middle enrich in New Jersey, then Chief Justice now the season Bob lens thought that, hey, if it's good for the wealthiest kids, if that's the kind of money they think is necessary, that's a surrogate, I think he thought for what it costs to provide high quality education in New Jersey. And we want the highest quality education for our poorest kids, because they needed the most was his rationale. And so you start with that, which is revolutionary around the country. And then you weave into it all these additions, including money for facilities. Preschool is also revolutionary. Typically around the country, even today. If a state is spending \$5,000, on a three year old, educated, it's thought of as a lot per year. In New Jersey, we're spending 1314 \$15,000 To educate three year olds, because the court recognized we persuaded the court to see if you didn't have teachers of three year olds, whose credentials were the same as public school teachers who were paid the same got the same benefits have the same kind of schedule. What inevitably happens is the public schools gobble up good preschool teachers from preschool programs, because they could pay so much more. You had to have the state funding these former daycare centers that had become preschool centers. As part of the Abbott mandate. You had that state funding to up the salaries of teachers so they can actually make a career out of teaching three year olds. In an avid preschool programs, a friend of mine runs the Ironman community cooperation, which has one of the finest avid preschools in the state now, he's paying a bilingual Portuguese English teacher who has been with him for many years, by now over \$80,000 a year salary that eats three year olds. Now that's historic people

don't think that you need to do that all you need is a loving adult. And that's wrong. Because the particularly for poor children, they need teachers who have good vocabulary, have good academic skills and help kids kind of break away from language deficiencies and other problems that unfortunately, they get from parents who themselves were not educated. So. So I think that even today, almost everyone would admit that the most singular accomplishment of AVID has been this high quality preschool program that is improving the chances of kids as they get into kindergarten every

Robert Curvin 1:09:52

year. Now, what is your view of this apparent approach of the core design administration? To argue that the AVID funding should be child based as opposed to district based, so that poor kids in West Orange or out in Montclair Montclair also has the case, you're saying per capita

Steve Block 1:10:21

funding places like Montclair get kids whose families are still relatively poor, with a lot of those norms and attitudes, and have real needs. And Montclair is never been, although it's viewed of a few dozen wealthy community has many of these communities are, it never has had the resources that truly wealthy communities have. And so it's never had, despite having a pretty good educational system, it's never had the actual programs that a poor kids need, in my view. And, and so I totally agree with that conception, that and in fact, we had argued early on, that Abbott should be expanded to include specific remedies as needed for the districts based upon poverty and particular needs that kids bring to the table. The problem with the way it's being implemented, as I understand, I've been away from it for a few years now. So I don't have nearly as many details as I once had. But the problem is that they are looking to reduce the funding for the Abbotts and take some of that money and redistribute it to the other districts. And what you need is not either or, but both end you need to maintain the funding for the AVID districts. I would argue, by the way, as part of some of the earlier things I said, the state has not sufficiently required AVID for that local district fidelity to the AVID remedies, and to the implementation of them to the reforms that AVID presumes will be made with the resources in the state and the state mandates, the state has not done nearly the job that needed to do to oversee that and enforce it and make sure that it was happening. And effect I can talk about a little bit my conflict. The reason why I'm no longer at the Law Center at the moment, is because I actually thought that we needed to begin to take on some of the districts that weren't adequately addressing the ABA remedies. And instead, the Law Center chose to continue, essentially following the lead of the urban superintendents. And I thought there that there the urban superintendents' position on these things, was largely driven by money and not sufficiently by an awareness of the kind of reforms that were essential for these kids to get the education they needed. And so we had a conflict and I subsequently left several years ago, but but that's still a problem, the problem with the leadership and the absence of sufficient local impulses to adequately use the resources and the added funding to reform and improve what's going on classroom, my classroom, school by school district wide and all these districts. And I don't think the state has done enough, I don't think Education Law Center has done enough to enforce that. And, and as a consequence, there wasn't the great leap forward in achievement levels. That could have been had an exist could have been used to. And we'll see what happens with the court, because the courts about to decide on on this new Corizon initiative to reduce the funding to the Abbott districts and spread it out to some of the other districts and I worry that it will undermine whatever gains have been made in the Abbott districts. Even though I argue that in many districts that wasn't enough, there still were gains

made and that if the money is reduced, the gains will be undermined. And we may go back to some level of the status quo ante which would be an absolutely horrific development

Robert Curvin 1:13:51

that's a good point to stop. But I want to give you a chance if there's anything we didn't cover or anything more that you want to add to this you're free to do so

Steve Block 1:14:15

I mean, I mean, you know, I'm I don't because I'm no longer in Newark haven't been for a number of years and I'm up here and I'm working on other stuff. I don't it's an it's not a daily live enough subject, that I don't know

Robert Curvin 1:14:32

We'll cut it here then.